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# Race, Form, and Tamburlaine

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## Race, Form, and Tamburlaine

Tamburlaine's initial declaration of his love for Zenocrate in act 1 scene 2 marks a clear turning point in their relationship and ostensibly alters a kidnapped Zenocrate's conception of her relationship to the ambitious Scythian. When she reappears at the beginning of act 3 scene 2 she professes her desire "That [she] may live and die with Tamburlaine." (3.2.25), and her love persists for the remainder of the *Tamburlaine* plays—won over by Tamburlaine's courageous actions and his rhetoric in their initial, on-stage encounter. Analysis of Tamburlaine's declaration might focus on the Scythian's apparent imperial claims as evinced by his evocation of distant nations and fruitful conquest, it may center on religious concerns conjured by his words pertaining to astrology and Jove, or it may consider Zenocrate's construction in tandem with riches and possessions. However, analysis of this declaration reveals another critical thread—race. Throughout Tamburlaine's appeal to Zenocrate he repeatedly praises her whiteness:

Zenocrate, lovelier than the love of Jove,  
Brighter than is the silver of Rhodope,  
Fairer than whitest snow on Scythian hills,  
Thy person is worth more to Tamburlaine  
Than the possession of the Persian Crown ...  
With milk-white harts upon an ivory sled

Thou shalt be drawn amidst the frozen pools  
 And scale the icy mountain's lofty tops,  
 Which with thy beauty will be soon resolved: (I 1.2.87-101)

From the outset, Tamburlaine subscribes to physical appearance and skin color as a standard of beauty, and clearly establishes both Zenocrate's pale complexion and the degree to which he admires it. She is figuratively placed in and above the heavens, but not for geo-political or religious regions. Rather, her Egyptian race, removed in this declaration from nationality or belonging to an ethnic group, is particularly beautiful and desirable to Tamburlaine—who praises it while announcing his imperial ambitions. Further, Tamburlaine distinguishes Zenocrate as “Fairer than the whitest snow on Scythian hills” (1.2.89), and positions her as an “othered” figure based on her skin-tone. He celebrates her differences with Scythia as a physical location, the “Hundred Tartars” (1.2.93) he claims will attend her, and himself—constructing her as “othered” physically but also ethnically. She is fairer than Scythia, and by implication Scythians. Thus, Tamburlaine's conception of Zenocrate is linked directly to an acknowledgment of her racial alterity, and he claims to privilege the physical characteristics and ethnic difference of her race above both crown and opulence.

Moreover, Tamburlaine seems to imagine Zenocrate's whiteness as fitting for a conqueror of the world. In his famous spectacle of ascendance from shepherd to warrior he tells Zenocrate, “But, lady, this fair face and heavenly hue / must grace his bed that conquers Asia/ And means to be a terror to the world” (1.2.36-38). Again, he acknowledges her whiteness as an aspect of her person that equals or surpasses divinity, and positions her at the pinnacle of a racially based hierarchy. Tamburlaine imagines her as a fitting bride for the conqueror of the world, and this claim in proximity to his rejection of his poor, Scythian roots seemingly favors Zenocrate as a pale Egyptian over a Scythian alternative. Thus, the concept

of race exists in *Tamburlaine* parts I and II and the plays provide evidence to support race-based interpretations. However, scholars have historically noted the differences of early modern conception of race to modern readers' understanding of it. Early modern race is traditionally thought to be more nebulous and difficult to discuss since there was less unified discourse about what exactly race entailed. Yet, race remains an important point of consideration when assessing the early modern period, even if race was not collectively defined in the late 1500s. So, the question emerges: in plays distinctly concerned with a breadth of identities, their construction, and alterity why has scholarly conversation largely ignored and simplified race?

Scholarly criticism surrounding *Tamburlaine parts I and II*'s construction of varying Asian identities has long centered on the presentation of alterity through religion, imperialism, colonialism, and Orientalism. However, scholarly discourse on the *Tamburlaine* plays has historically failed to explicate race and acknowledge its presence without either subsuming its critical significance into another determinate of alterity, or declaring it an anachronism—with both approaches rooted in an overwhelmingly white perspective. This refusal to examine race independent of nation or religion may in part be considered an attempt to maintain modern conception of race as a social construct or stay true to early modern conceptions of race. However, ignoring the presence of physical signifiers both within and beyond the play's text ultimately propagates an erasure of race entirely—regardless of good-intentions. Thus, I intend to acknowledge these dominant, interpretive perspectives and transition to consideration of race within the plays to illustrate the merit of a perspective that acknowledges both the applicability of race to drama in the early modern period and the representational significance of staging racial alterity before a white, English audience.

I will validate this perspective through a breadth of criticism pertaining to the construction of Asian alterity, a detailed attempt to isolate and analyze the presence and signification of race and ethnicity within the plays and a consideration of the plays' staging to consider presentations of race independently. Further, I will turn to critical race theory to posit a framework through which construction of race in the Tamburlaine plays may be understood as well as its influence on early modern discourse. Critical race theory is a modern school of thought that defines race as a malleable, societal invention employed to the advantage of the dominant race. It posits the construction of races both in relation to one another and in tandem with other political and social forms such as the economy, law, and the given historical-context. It resists essentialism and allows theorists to unpack hierarchical constructions of race. Critical race theory offers a fresh perspective with which to assess the racial complexities of *Tamburlaine* while preserving the temporal divide via its consideration of race's collision with other political forms.

Ultimately, I will turn to Caroline Levine's work in *Forms* analyze how the plays' collision with other political and aesthetic forms indicates a means of potentially challenging the racial hegemony it propagates. It is this collision of political and aesthetic forms that is partially responsible for the conspicuous lack of racial criticism, and I find Levine's work in *Forms* offers sufficient theoretical ground to consider how race has traditionally been ignored in favor of ostensibly more dominant political forms of the period. Moreover, *Forms* presents an opportunity to consider how aesthetic forms in the past influence our literature and assumptions of race today.

### **Critical Conceptions and Race: Orientalism, Nation, and Religion**

Late twentieth century considerations of alterity in the Tamburlaine plays have largely

been comprised of a New-Historicist focus on imperialism, geo-politics, and Islamic faith in a push against a purely Orientalist reading of the plays. Ultimately, the dominant critical voice has pursued a singular focus on imperialist self-construction and concerns of alterity often espouse race because it does not have a hotly-contested precedent. New Historicist and Post-Colonial scholars have instead debated Orientalism and its applicability to *Tamburlaine* more generally. Orientalism in this sense refers to scholarly application of Said's groundbreaking work to understand *Tamburlaine* as indicative of a western restructuring of the East.

Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 11). This perspective translates *Tamburlaine* and its characters through a West-East binary in which the varying Asian identities of the play are imagined stereotypically as a by-product of the West's desire to dominate the binary and construct an East that is undeniably beneath them culturally, biologically, and intellectually. Scholars have traditionally found the framework a compelling way to mediate European imperial and colonial desires within the play, but this reading has increasingly been challenged as essentialist and ahistorical.

Critics have argued that *Tamburlaine parts I and II* cannot simply be understood as a projection of English imperial desire through dramatic tropes regarding popular conception of the East. Jonathan Burton encapsulates this repudiation of Orientalism from a New-Historicist perspective in his essay "Anglo-Ottoman Relations and the Image of the Turk in *Tamburlaine*" claiming:

The value of Said's *Orientalism* has been its indication of the complex distortions of American and European discourses of the East that textually restructure foreign cultures and traditions in the interest of establishing and maintaining Western superiority. The danger of Said's work is its availability as a matrix to be applied to

any East-West encounter...The ahistorical application of Said's or other postcolonial theories to this period has the potential to produce distorting, reductive arguments. Marlowe's plays are not examples of early Orientalism. Rather, they are illustrations of a separate, but equally complex and unsettling, European relationship with Islam. (Burton 152)

Burton and other critics draw upon the historic, geo-political circumstances of Elizabethan England to challenge Orientalism with renewed focus on England's relations with the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, Orientalist thinking purports the idea that the English imagined themselves to be a dominant power in relation to the Ottoman Empire, but this perspective fails to account for the overwhelming might of the Ottomans in the early modern period and their own imperial ambitions. Bartels acknowledges the might of the Ottoman Empire as well in her essay *Double Vision of The East – Imperial Construction in Tamburlaine* and states, “the East was the home of England's most powerful and threatening non-European competitor for the world's land and wealth, the Turks, who had already established an empire” (Bartels 4). Therefore, the Ottoman Empire stood as a symbol of imperial power and its colonial interests allowed for public differentiation of a wide variety of Asian countries. Moreover, the Ottoman Empire itself was decidedly multi-racial—representing more than just Turkish identity. England could not easily homogenize Asian identity nor could it project its own colonial ambitions onto a nebulous, barbaric other without acknowledging the success and importance of the Ottoman Empire.

Accounting for historically-evinced, English anxieties regarding the military, economic, religious, and cultural reach of the Ottoman empire reveals the representational duplicity of *Tamburlaine parts I and II*. In the early modern period, New-Historicist criticism contends that the *Tamburlaine* plays mediate not only England's imperial desires but, simultaneously its fear and reverence for the dominant Asian civilizations of the period—

civilizations with which it engaged in trade and politics. Hence, *Tamburlaine parts I and II* offers consideration of both the projection of English identity and a representation of various Asian identities as well. As Burton notes, “English representations of Turks were often rehearsals of conventional stereotypes, but they also could and did shift to accommodate historical circumstances” (Burton 6). However, England’s attempt to mediate its Ottoman-anxieties and imperial self-construction was decidedly influenced by a shifting political climate and acknowledgment of a breadth of Asian and European nations.

England’s conception of Ottomans, Persians, Scythians, Egyptians, and themselves were conditional, flexible, and representative of a complex political climate, and this complexity problematizes binary, homogenous conceptions of identity. As Bartels claims in her essay *East of England – Imperial Construction in Tamburlaine*, Tamburlaine himself complicates the establishment of an English, imperialist self-other relation predicated on difference. Tamburlaine imagines himself “not just in all or nothing terms, as either self or other, but also, paradoxically, in all and nothing terms, as self and other... undermin[ing] the dichotomization vital to imperialist self-fashioning” (Bartels 81). He rises from Scythian origins, refers to himself as “the Persian King” (II 5.1.165), defeats the Ottomans, but subverts clear ethno-national and religious identity—resisting English projection via his opposition to Europe and Christendom. Tamburlaine is not a figure through which a European audience may comfortably imagine their own ambitions, nor does he present a singular, Eastern identity—comprised solely of stereotypes.

Thus, dominant components of identity and alterity for contemporary scholars of *Tamburlaine* parallel that of the early modern period, and ultimately overlook race in favor of imperial and colonial concerns. Both Post Colonialism and New Historicism engage in discourse focused on imperial self-construction, the need to interpret the historical context surrounding the Tamburlaine plays, and their establishment of difference. Post Colonialism



endeavors to illustrate the repercussions of English projection and stereotyping, but New Historicism provides the basis to reimagine and challenge an Orientalist understanding of self-other establishment. Race becomes a secondary categorization of alterity and lacks efficacy in a conversation dominated by empire. *Tamburlaine* posits no clear, binary racialization to latch on to, nor does the evocation of race allow contemporary critics to sufficiently examine the anxieties of an early modern England in a complex geo-political climate. It becomes much easier for the critical conversation to focus on the text in moments such as Tamburlaine's imperially motivated lamentation: "And shall I die and this unconquered?" (II 5.3.150), rather than his racial difference relative to Bajazeth or Zenocrate. Hence, race is positioned below political formations such as nation and empire through examination of historical evidence and modern concerns regarding the violence of colonialism.

Religion further complicates the efficacy of race as a clarifying signifier for early modern audiences, and Marlowe bestows his characters with a subversive complexity that prevents simple dissolution. Most notably, Tamburlaine's religious affiliation and the play's stance on religion have remained a hotbed of critical debate. As Watkins remarks in her essay *Justice is a Mirage: Failures of Religious Order in Marlowe's Tamburlaine Plays*, "the plays' larger attitude toward religion [is]—namely, that they deliberately contest the idea that any one system of faith can fully explain human events." (Watkins 165). Tamburlaine does not endorse Christianity, burns the Koran, and dies shortly after challenging Mahomet. He is repeatedly described as the scourge of God, and directly questions the existence of divinity in the first place, commanding his fallen adversaries to "Seek out another godhead to adore, / The God that sits in heaven, if any god" (II 5.1.198-199). As such, Tamburlaine is a problematic champion of white, Christian identity should early modern audiences seek to align with those who would oppose a racially based other that also opposes Islam. Early

modern concerns regarding religion prevents the use of Tamburlaine as a direct foil for English identity and distances him somewhat from audiences through the spectacle of his audacious challenge to the efficacy of Christianity alongside Islam.

Here, I do not mean to conflate religion and race; rather I intend to suggest that as measures of alterity race, nation, and religion are amalgamated to some extent in the perspective of both an early modern populace and criticism that intends to construct either stable projections of identity or an us-them dynamic. These means of identification remain in competition as different signifiers upon which to project identity, and for Elizabethan audiences these categories ostensibly saw slippage and conflation. Nationality, race, and religion remain independent categories but notably the term “*Turk*” was coextensive with Islam in early modern European rhetoric. To ‘*turn Turk*’ was to abandon Christianity and embrace Islam” (Burton 126). Thus, modern, critical examination of the plays that seeks to uphold a historically-evincing understanding of early modern conception of race has often partially collapsed it and placed greater emphasis on religion and nation as the critical determinate of identity.

The importance of other political forms such as nation and religion, as well as their supposed relation to early modern conceptions of race, seems to ultimately cloud and obscure race from a purely New Historicist perspective and offers an explanation for the decided lack of contemporary race-based criticism. And yet, such a simple, dominant obstruction to critical thought demands reevaluation—lest it enact and propagate ideological violence against a silenced, racialized people. Peter Erickson and Kim F. Hall, the editors of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, have recently drawn attention to this need for critical reevaluation in the preface to an issue centered on race and racially-based scholarship pertaining to the early modern period: “*A New Scholarly Song*”: *Rereading Early Modern Race*. They attack the resistance to consideration of early modern race in the contemporary, scholarly climate:

Initial opposition to early modern race studies, associated primarily with New Historicism, was encapsulated in the single word “anachronism” and informally deployed as a scare tactic and conversation stopper. As an automatic reflex, this response too easily slides into blanket denial. Overemphasis on anachronism has run its course, and its persuasive power is now diminished. (Erickson and Hall 4-5)

They refute the dominant, interpretive mode of strict adherence to the historically accurate definition of race and reclaim the need to resist erasure of race through a rejection of an understood fluidity in early modern race studies. The word ‘fluidity’ in early modern race gestures to the accepted understanding that race was far less clearly defined in the period and there was no collectively shared definition of race. As a result, race apparently took on a more nebulous form—variably predicated on “species, lineage, family, disposition as well as identities coded by ethnicity, religion and color” (Bartels 212). But, ascription of instability to early modern race ultimately suggests both a sense of solidity in our contemporary thinking and an inability to assess ideological violence in the early modern period. To describe race as previously fluid is to implicitly hint both that racial divisions today are unchanging and that racial prejudices of the past were in flux or not widely applicable.

Erikson and Hall recognize this danger stating, “focus on fluidity can reinforce a tendency to approach race purely as an abstraction, thus ignoring the implications of living as a raced subject then and now as well as the political urgency many of us feel in doing this work” (Erickson and Hall 11). Further, they challenge a problematic counterpoint—the concept of universality in racial perspectives. They state that there must be “no conflation of past and present. Instead, two historical moments with distinct ideas of race are put in interpretive relation to produce a comparative perspective.” (Erickson and Hall 7). While

universality suggests the relative stability of racial perspectives and the potential for answering modern concerns through early modern literature, Erickson and Hall suggest the need to consider race comparatively—thereby debasing racial prejudices as static and unalterable. Thus, this reassessment of the critical climate declares the importance of analyzing race across two distinctly separate time periods and considering the confining nature of both pervasive scholarship and the dominant narratives our own moment.

The goals Erickson and Hall establish rely on the framework provided by critical race theory—an intellectual, activist movement that differentiates itself from traditional racial scholarship by considering a more comprehensive perspective and challenging established assumptions. This framework pertains heavily to our contemporary movement, and a need to reimagine the American legal system in the wake of lacking change following the civil rights movement. But this framework retains applicability to the early modern period for overturning entrenched assumptions. Delgado and Stefancic, two founders of critical race theory, express its applicability in this regard noting its examination of “a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious” (Delgado and Stefancic 3). By considering the interplay of race and other political forms, as well as, exploring “methods that embrace strangeness” (Erickson and Hall 13) race in the early modern period may be effectively reevaluated.

Moreover, several tenets of critical race theory are particularly useful for reimagining early modern race and the construction of identity. Critical race theory establishes that “race and races are products of social thoughts and relations...categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado and Stefancic 7). This perspective provides a foundation to combat biological essentialism and illuminates the existence of differential racialization—“the ways the dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times, in response to shifting needs” (Delgado and Stefancic 8). Further, the

movement posits the construction of races in relation to one another and claims “more work needs to be done in the area of early modern whiteness studies. The use of the term “race” to mean only black or ‘of color’ is unsatisfactory” (Delgado and Stefancic 7). This idea, that race is a social construction influenced heavily by hegemony and that this hegemony constructs different races in relation to each other, proves exceedingly relevant to consideration of the Tamburlaine plays and performativity.

### **Early Modern Race, Tamburlaine, and Performativity**

Racially-based critical assessment of the Tamburlaine plays has remained almost non-existent. The little criticism that exists has ultimately taken to nebulous conceptions of fluidity in early modern race and fails to offer sufficient comparison to our contemporary moment. While early modern race discourse may have been more nebulous than its modern counterpart evidence suggests it existed nonetheless. Queen Elizabeth I wrote “there are of late divers blackmoores brought into this realme, of which kinde of people there are allready here to manie” (Dasent 16), within a decade of Tamburlaine’s staging, and ultimately evinces the existence of racial prejudices and a budding racial discourse in the period.

Sandra Young’s 2016 essay “Race and the Global South in Early Modern Studies” offers further insight into the constituents of early modern racial discourse. She explicates the existence of a conception of alterity predicated on north-south geological differences and notes the resultant racialized assumptions this apparent difference propagates. She analyzes a breadth of primary sources and concludes that the “distinction between the ‘south’ and ‘north’ helped to establish a racial hierarchy on a global scale. The ‘southern climes’ were regions whose natural resources seemed to invite exploitation and whose seemingly primitive peoples warranted the influences of the ‘north’ (Young 127). The early modern north-south

distinction is implicitly tied to race and traffics in biological essentialism based on early modern, humoral understandings of the body. As Young notes, this emerging view in the period posited that the “body and mind are shaped by climate, which explains the unquestionable superiority of the ‘Northern People’ of the globe” (Young 128). Thus, scholarly members of early modern English society were beginning to engage with essentialist ideas of race, and the racial discourse of the period was at least partially predicated on race as inherent, hierarchal, and embodied.

Emily Bartels presents a prime example of a perspective that does good work to illuminate the existence of early modern race and racist remarks in her 2013 essay, *Race Nation and Marlowe*, but does not fully consider racialization and the affordances of theater when analyzing the plays. Bartels draws attention to race in a brief analysis of Tamburlaine’s initial confrontation with Bajazeth, and indicates the use of race, as predicated on ethnicity, for derogatory purposes within the dialogue of the play. She draws attention to the words they use to construct themselves and each other citing Bajazeth’s self-introduction as “the greatest potentate of Africa” (I 3.3.63) and his remark “note the presumption of this Scythian slave!” (I 3.3.68). Bartels gestures to the alliteration of ‘Scythian slave’ and turns to the OED to establish that ‘slave’ “takes root from the Latin *slavus*...the name for a Slavic people who were conquered in the 9<sup>th</sup> century” (Bartels 220) and a race of people historically entwined with the Scythians. In turn, Tamburlaine responds with “And know, Turk, that those which lead my horse / shall lead thee captive thorough Africa” (I 3.3.71-72). Both characters place emphasis on the other’s race as a point of insult—clearly set off within the text.

Their figurations of each other’s respective race are undeniably negative and imagined in relation to the plays’ multi-racial cast. Bajazeth conceives of the northern Scythians as lowly slaves, unfit to address him, and the text accents his incredulity with an exclamation point in addition to the alliteration. Moreover, the word slave does not logically

denote Tamburlaine in this instance as Bajazeth has neither defeated him nor proclaimed that he will enslave Tamburlaine. Hence, it serves only to play up his understanding of the Scythian race's base status—beneath his tributary “kings of Fez, Morocco, and Argiers” (I 3.3.66). His tributary kings are no doubt beneath him, but are at least given the honor of leading his horses and addressing him as lord. But, Tamburlaine's response inverts the hierarchy Bajazeth attempts to establish, and instead of referring to the Turkish ruler by name or title he makes a point of calling him a Turk—set off formally in the text as a medial caesura. Bajazeth is stripped of his nobility, his dominance over African kings, and is demeaned through denotation as a ‘Turk’. Moreover, he is a ‘Turk’ that Tamburlaine claims he will subsequently parade through Africa as a spectacle. In this instance both characters insultingly identify the other in terms of race, as predicated on ethnicity, and simultaneously position the people of Africa as representative of a middle point in the hierarchy they wish to establish. Thus, they enact racialization to some degree within the text—even before consideration of the early modern audience that imagines the two figures in relation to each other and their own sense of Englishness.

This claim of textual racialization is further bolstered by Tamburlaine's degradation of the Turkish people just before his encounter with Bajazeth, and the way he imagines them in relation to the Christians and Africans. He essentializes the Turkish race while viewing an approaching Bajazeth, and claims, “Tush, Turks are full of brags / and menace more than they can well perform” (I 3.3.3-4). Then, he declares his intention to free “those Christian captives which you keep as slaves” (I 3.3.47), and decries Bajazeth's “damned train, the scum of Africa, / inhabited with struggling runagates” (I 3.3.56-57). While the word Christians does not explicitly denote race it nonetheless ties into Tamburlaine's conception of a generalized, European race which he claims he will liberate from Bajazeth's clutches. The northern races of Europe are privileged in this moment as a populace somehow worthy of

Tamburlaine's sympathy, and he uses them to play up the villainy of the boastful Turk he constructs. Moreover, he specifically delineates the Africans of Bajazeth's train as 'the scum of Africa', and, through such an accusation, implies he thinks much more highly of the African people that have not aligned with the Turkish forces. Such thinking suggests Tamburlaine's own interpretive hierarchy of race—one that seems to privilege European and generally western races above a generalized, eastern, Turkish identity that he defines as cruel and ignorant.

Bartels acknowledges this racism, but concludes that this instance merely indicates Marlowe's acknowledgement of racism and racial terms of the period—not an example of racialization. For Bartels, claims of race in this moment and others in the plays are tempting but not convincing as representations of either an essentialist racial view-point or one that constructs racial identities within a hierarchy. Ultimately, she ignores racialization, on the part of the characters, and instead cites this confrontational moment as an instance of racism that remains local to their desire to demean each other. Her interpretive perspective then declines to both consider racial posturing within the play as more than character specific opinions—not indicative of external context nor endorsing actual, racist ideology beyond the text. For Bartels, the Tamburlaine plays posit both a reaffirmation of race's 'fluidity' and complexity within the period and Marlowe's attempt to both play upon and challenge race-based assumptions. In her conclusion she states:

To read race in Marlowe's plays, then, is to delve into the contingencies that are the heart and soul of any play. It is to understand that racial identities and inscriptions are invariably case-specific, settled and unsettled by changing actions, speech acts, times. In Marlowe, Scythians, Persians, Egyptians, Turks, Christians and Jews are who they are. And if the plays prompt us to take these figures as representative of a given race,



the plays simultaneously demand that we question in what terms, whose terms, and why. (Bartels 220)

While Bartels' final sentence gestures towards the need to excavate the workings of political forms and dominant ideologies she fails to do more than express a conditional concern. She writes as if taking the play's characters to be representational is far-fetched, and seems to claim that only if we buy into this representational nature should we raise concerns about its existence within the text. Further, through use of the pronoun "we" she eliminates the need to ask if early modern audiences would have considered these characters works of fiction that undermine popular stereotypes of the period or reinforce them. While she claims, "spectators would likely have come to the theater with certain if diverse assumptions" (Bartels 219), her criticism ends with the idea that race is merely existent in the narrative, and she seems to suggest that the contingencies of the play subvert possible, ideological violence via representation.

It is here that I wish to offer a more substantial counter-point to Bartels' reading of the play and suggest that by ignoring the visual dimension of the play and the spectacle of Asian alterity in the early modern period she too-heavily downplays representational readings and proclaims the triumph of Marlowe's subversive potential. While I agree that for contemporary audiences reading the play the characters may resist racial stereotypes and expectations, early modern audiences watching the play would be more aware of the geo-political and religious relevance to their lives as well as the visible signifiers of race. Thus, the spectacle of the play and costuming would lend itself to the ascription and validation of racial-based assumptions.

Consider the encounters between Orcanes and Sigismund in acts 1 and 2 of *Tamburlaine part II*. Orcanes leads the Turkish forces as the "King of Natolia" (II 1.1.13)

and makes a pact with Sigismund, “the King of Hungary” (II 1.1.10) to oppose Tamburlaine and come to each other’s aid. However, Sigismund breaks “the articles of peace / and solemn covenants...both confirmed, / ...by [Sigismund’s] Christ and [Orcanes] by Mahomet” (II 2.2.30-32), and attacks a weakened Orcanes. Orcanes declares that “If there be Christ, we shall have victory” (II 2.2.64), and subsequently Sigismund’s forces are crushed. Ultimately, Sigismund himself is denied a proper burial and left “for fowls to prey upon” (II 2.3.39). Their clash presents the sole representation of Europeans in conflict with figures of racial alterity in the plays, and Sigismund’s company ostensibly offers the closest racial representation to the English.

Indeed, Bartels briefly references these characters to suggest religion’s capacity to complicate racial identify and biases, but I argue that these figures illustrate a divide in representation and the construction of identity, despite their subversion of religious expectations and lacking racial signifiers within the text. Bartels does not explicate the text pertaining to these characters because it offers little in the way of racist remarks or overt racialization—instead offering only terms tied more closely to nation and religion such as: Turk, Europe, Hungary, Christian, Pagan. However, the potential for a representational reading that privileges white bodies and scrutinizes alterity emerges through consideration of external elements, such as costuming and the immediacy of staging *Tamburlaine part II* to a white, European audience.

Critics have often read Sigismund and his delegation as evidence that Marlowe believes “like Muslims and pagans, Christians are treacherous and morally compromised” (Watkins 178), but this crisis of white representation for early modern audiences may be avoided through alternate political forms and the solidity of white identity outside the text. As Virginia Vaughan claims in her essay, *Signifying the “Other” in Early Modern English Drama*, “European strangers were readily found on the busy streets of London...they were

not likely to be distinguished by costume...but few English people had travelled as far as Turkey (Vaughan 119). Whiteness entwined with national difference (and therefore as a facet but not determinate of identity) was ascribed in the English consciousness. Already, early modern audiences held a diverse set of assumptions and expectations that painted whiteness in a positive light and the means to deny Sigismund representational value. For audiences, he is by no means the sole representative of whiteness—even when removed from England. Audiences were capable of looking to the stage to see a Sigismund donned in familiar attire for European nobility, and of surveying the theater to note a sea of whiteness. Moreover, they could draw upon their own self-construction and the fact that their lives were dominated entirely by whiteness and interaction with white individuals.

Thus, Sigismund and his delegation's whiteness did not signify their villainous character (as made apparent in their betrayal of Orcanes), rather they stood upon the stage as individuals who were simply deceptive and traitorous characters—unrelated to visual signifiers of race. Audiences had an overwhelming breadth of experience to resist anti-essentialist understandings of whiteness and the political desire to maintain the sanctity of white identity in relation to the other. Further, Protestant, English audiences under Elizabeth I maintained additional methods of distancing Sigismund as a means of preserving racial identity—construction of alterity via his Catholicism and a rejection of a shared European identity. If the early modern period imagined race as more fluid than the contemporary moment and partially tied to other political forms than it becomes far easier to divorce Sigismund's villainy from white identity on alternate terms. Namely, his historical basis' Catholic faith as evinced in records of Pope Martin V— “in his Poppedome he Crowned *Sigismond* Emperour at Rome” (Bale 159). This in turn allows audiences to better account for his defeat, betrayal of Christ, and gruesome fate.

But are audiences that reject the representational value of Sigismund likely to

perceive Orcanes positively in this instance? He does claim that “in [his] thoughts shall Christ be honored” (II 2.3.33), but does this truly complicate his “cruel slaughter of...Christian bloods” (II 2.1.5)? Critically, the comparison to Sigismund’s perceived lack of authenticity as an accurate representation of race draws on a context that Orcanes is removed from.

Decidedly, Orcanes does not transcend representational interpretation through a multitude of external experience and interaction. Undoubtedly, early modern audiences lacked a breadth of personal experience with Turkish people, despite the potential familiarity with Turkish rulers and historical figures. Orcanes, then, must resist the Turk stereotype (that of a despotic and enraged expansionist), but he and his men are not given the luxury of either an audience with personal, Turkish interaction nor a costume that removes him from the budding tradition of the ‘Turk’ figure on stage. Unfortunately, considerations of Turkish costuming in the Tamburlaine plays are speculative and no known records of Orcanes’ (or even Bajazeth’s) costuming exist.

However, Matthew Dimmock surveys the costuming for Turkish representation on stage in his essay *Materialising Islam on the Early Modern English Stage*, and his work offers a starting point for considering the visual signifiers of alterity on stage. Dimmock notes the tendency in plays following Tamburlaine to portray Turkish rulers via convention and visual cues. He cites “the theatrical convention to depict the ‘Turk’ in elaborate gown and turban... a very specific ‘Turkish’ identity” (Dimmock 122), and evokes a fascination with Turkish rulers in power—the main subject of many Turk plays in the 1600s. Powerful Turkish rulers (such as Orcanes) were often portrayed with turbans and clothing depicting a sense of opulence, but Dimmock also claims that early modern actors often “donned false mustaches and carried large scimitars” (Dimmock 129) in order to perform other roles such as that of the Janissaries.

Presumably, Orcanes and his men, as well as other figures of Turkish identity within the play, were costumed to some extent in this manner as signification of both their status as rulers, their opposition to Tamburlaine, and to evoke assumptions regarding Turkish identity—predicated in-part on racial biases. As Dimmock states, plays were reliant “on an audience to decipher the signals that costuming and stage properties might have conveyed. Such reliance suggests the active participation of an audience in the creation of these spectacles of strangeness” (Dimmock 119). If such costuming relied on a pre-existing set of stereotypes and activated these assumptions purely through visualization, then ignoring the possibility of racialization in the Tamburlaine plays, predicated by the audience’s acceptance of the players as compelling representations of a racial other, is inherently problematic.

And yet, a further aspect of costuming often signaled racial difference on the early modern stage—makeup. The use of blackface is prominently documented in plays featuring African Moors, marks a direct signifier of racial distinction beyond attire, and could not be assigned to nation or religion alone. While the cast of *Tamburlaine parts I and II* would not have worn blackface, the potential use of brown-face is by no means ruled out. Kimberly Poitevin gestures to this possibility in her essay *Inventing Whiteness: Cosmetics, Race, and Woman In Early Modern England* and states, “in the popular theater...professional actors in blackface and brown-face makeup stormed Renaissance stages, playing the Turkish, Indian, and African characters” (Poitevin 61). Skin color then becomes an easily signified indicator of race and difference for the early modern English that potentially activated audiences’ preconceived assumptions.

Race was resultantly grafted onto embodied, visual signifiers and both preexisting racial-based assumptions and new ones, formed on the staged representations of alterity, were nurtured through this performative practice. Ultimately, Orcanes is unable to overcome the assumptions tied to Turkish identity through performativity—the embodiment of race

through costumed distinction and the spectacle of his violent acts of warfare. Audiences did not possess enough evidence to suggest Orcanes' failure as a believable representation of Turkish identity, they carry a set of stereotypes with which to racialize him, and he is costumed in a manner that demands attention be paid to his racial otherness.

In short, theater took on the power to both construct identities tied to race and solidify existent racial ideology. Further, "the English learned to see black and brown skin colors as significant markers of race with respect to peoples in other parts of the world, [and] there arose a pressing need to define themselves as racial subjects." (Poitevin 62). Thus, English audiences engaged in differential racialization and figured race in *Tamburlaine I* and *II* beyond the text itself. The *Tamburlaine* plays and the instability of early modern English identity (resulting from repeated religious turnover and concerning geopolitics) emphasized the importance of race in a way scholars have previously overlooked, as predicated on staged performances and visual signifiers in addition to the alterity of figures in the text alone. Ultimately, the English constructed a hierarchy through which to stratify the racial representations they encountered on stage.

### **Racialization, Reception, Hierarchy**

Here, I find it important to briefly repeat the distinctions of the hierarchy I am assessing from modern scholarship that posits a more generalized us-them dynamic. It must be noted both that critical race theory offers a perspective capable of resisting more essentialist, Orientalist readings of this hierarchy, and that differential racialization enacted by the early moderns cannot be accurately located within the text alone. As illustrated, race in the plays is too nuanced to be entirely reduced into a singular, barbarous other, despite the need to figure race into an English identity. Moreover, performance, spectacle, and audience

reception are critical to understanding how race in the Tamburlaine plays operated in tandem with early modern discourse. Interpretation of race will inevitably be restricted if the performative aspect of the text as a play is ignored or marginalized. It is this element of performativity and reception in accordance with the application of critical race theory that allows for a new reading to challenge scholars such as Bartels and their claims that the play subverts racialization—restricting it to characters alone.

*Tamburlaine I and II's* staging not only forces it into early modern racial discourse but also allows it to resist pervasive claims of Marlovian subversion regarding race through audience reception. Indeed, the complexity of Marlowe's characters has long allowed scholars to claim that the plays resist racialization, and they traditional look to the deceitful, white, European Sigismund, pity for caged Bajazeth, and Tamburlaine's tyrannical violence to suggest the indeterminacy of a racial hierarchy endorsed by the text. However, audience receptions to performances of the plays and historic, ethnographic analysis of race greatly complicate interpretation of the plays as either racially subversive, indeterminate, or essentialized.

A racial hierarchy emerges from interpretation of the plays alongside records of audience reception, and privileges northern whiteness through praise of the Scythian race while establishing both Persians and Egyptians above the Turkish. Scholars have often claimed that Tamburlaine's violence and grotesque acts (such as the slaughter of the virgins of Damascus) presents him in an irredeemable light for early modern audiences, and positions the Scythian on the same level as his Turkish adversaries, but historical accounts refute this reading of the play. Richard Levin's essay *The Contemporary Perception of Marlowe's Tamburlaine* surveys all existing audience accounts of the Tamburlaine plays, and ultimately establishes that public regard for the Scythian was undeniably positive.

Tamburlaine “was intended to evoke the audience's wonder and admiration. And those who

speak of the audience also agree that he did in fact evoke a favorable response of this kind” (Levin 55), rather than one of disgust.

The early moderns’ response to Tamburlaine extends to literature and the collective consciousness—not only maintaining a positive interpretation of him but also indicating the extent to which performances of *Tamburlaine I* and *II* reverberated in the collective consciousness. As Levin claims, “the overwhelming impression created by all these allusions is that Tamburlaine was perceived as a triumphant figure who possessed and wielded tremendous power” (Levin 56). Critically, this reading of the Scythian is not only favorable despite his monstrosity but does not detract from his triumphs or condemn him as punished by divinity. Playgoers did not come away with the modern, ironic reading that presents Tamburlaine as an infidel and failure, nor did they imagine his Scythian lineage to be indicative of a base status and barbarity. Instead, his might and success are regarded with reverence.

Further, if Marlowe intended Tamburlaine to serve as a moralistic lesson, the Scythian rejects this fate and turns conceptions of morality on his opponents. As Levin’s analysis indicates, audiences’ understanding of admonitory lessons within the play were “never derived from Tamburlaine’s fate but always from the fates of his victims—either Bajazeth or those harnessed kings” (Levin 61). Figures of Turkish identity are routinely challenged, bested, and humiliated before Tamburlaine and his forces. Their power as worthy adversaries is acknowledged but ultimately stripped from them as they seemingly demonstrate Tamburlaine’s statement: “Tush, Turks are full of brags / and menace more than they can well perform” (I 3.3.3-4). Thus, it would seem the power of spectacle, such as the use of Bajazeth as a footstool, reaffirmed Tamburlaine’s racialization in the eyes of audiences.



This perspective then offers a starting point for assessing differential racialization as enacted by early modern audiences and undeniably favors Scythian Tamburlaine above the Turkish figures in the play. Mary Floyd-Wilson offers ethnographic insight into this construction of Scythian identity and its potential ties to the English populace's emerging struggle to locate race within identity. In her book, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama's* chapter "Tamburlaine and the Staging of white Barbarity", she draws upon an early modern understanding of geographically influenced, biological concerns regarding race to evince English identification with a shared, northern identity.

Tamburlaine, as a Scythian, is ensconced in the Slavic tradition and ostensibly his racial characteristics parallel the English due to his northern origins. She cites that "it was held that Scythians were among the earliest settlers of the British Isles" (Floyd-Wilson 90), and that by imagining "Tamburlaine, as a hero...[the] plays offer up a northern revisionist-perspective that may have tapped into English anxieties about their own ethnic identity." (Floyd-Wilson 96). The barbarity that modern scholars attribute to Tamburlaine may then be interpreted as a point of pride for a British—a population that might not have considered themselves as inherently more civil or powerful than the Asian nations of the period. As Floyd-Wilson notes his rise from humble, northern origins to defeat a slew of powerful, Islamic opponents would have resonated with ethnic English concerns. Marlowe, was likely aware of this and it could easily have informed his decision to make Tamburlaine Scythian rather than staying true to his historical reference—the Turkish Timur.

Marlowe's Tamburlaine is indeed modeled on an Islamic and Turkish figure of conquest, but Tamburlaine's construction as a Scythian and his allusions to a distinctly northern geography situates him much more closely to the English than his historical counterpart. While Timur justified his initial campaigns as "a reimposition of legitimate Mongol control over lands taken by usurpers and as a reassertion of the rights of the house of

Chinggis Khan” (Forbes Manz 25), Tamburlaine seems to model himself after the familiar, western figure “great Alexander” (II 5.1.69). Thus, his deliberate construction as a white, northern conqueror that emulates Alexander the Great (and frequently draws attention to this comparison through reassertion that he is the ruler of Persia) places Tamburlaine within a European frame of reference and identity. Marlowe deliberately avoids strongly associating Tamburlaine with Asian identity and instead allows his overt whiteness, northern origins, and references to moments of triumph for western civilization to establish him favorably for English audiences concerned with their own ethnicity—drawing on the idea of Scythians as being geographically and racially tied to the English.

The early moderns would not be able to directly map themselves onto Tamburlaine as previously evinced, but when constructing their own racial identity, alongside the performance of the plays, they no doubt would have racialized the representations they watched in a manner similar to the Scythian hero. Tamburlaine himself is repeatedly presented in the text through visual signifiers that would have made his Scythian identity even more palatable to early modern audiences. He is reportedly:

Of stature tall and straightly fashioned...  
 So large of limbs, his joints so strongly knit,  
 Such breadth of shoulders as might mainly bear  
 Old Atlas’ burden; ‘twixt his manly pitch,  
 A pearl more worth than all the world is placed,  
 Wherein by curious sovereignty of art  
 Are fixed his piercing instruments of sight...  
 Pale of complexion, wrought in him with passion...  
 His lofty brows in folds do figure death...

About them hangs a knot of amber hair (I 1.2.7-23)

The Scythian is distinguished as the epitome of masculinity and power, and his physical characteristics are easily represented through a British actor—idealized, but familiar. The text specifically references his pale complexion and amber hair, a distinction that likely set him apart from both the Turkish figures in the play and the assumptions of playgoers. He would undeniably be played by a white actor and clothed differently from his adversaries. From the first act, Tamburlaine is established in the text and on stage to be a recognizable, if not ideal, representation of northern ethnicity. Moreover, Tamburlaine's own whiteness and physical beauty ostensibly inform his aesthetic standards—as indicated in his valuation of Zenocrate's physical characteristics. He perceives his own physique as further evidence of his grand destiny, and imagines himself as fit to stand above even divinity. The same consideration of physical characteristics and racial assumptions potentially informs Tamburlaine's puzzling reference to Christians oppressed under Bajazeth just before their confrontation. Thus, Tamburlaine seems to imagine physical signifiers of race as indicative of essentialist characteristics and attributes—privileging whiteness and mirroring early modern audiences. Scythians are powerful, noble, and triumphant and other representations of race are constructed in relation to this pinnacle.

Tamburlaine further develops hierarchical consideration of race through assessment of his initial Persian foes and his Egyptian bride. In both cases, the text offers physical appearance as a guide for interpretation and the construction of identity. I have already gestured to the influence of race in his initial declaration of love for Zenocrate, but Tamburlaine's first encounter with his soon-to-be friend and commander Theridamas offers another example of appearance informing perceptions of character. Tamburlaine immediately marks Theridamas as a man worthy of respect before they have exchanged anything more

than names. He declares, “With what a majesty he rears his looks! / In thee, thou valiant man of Persia...That by thy martial face and stout aspect...shalt thou be competitor with me, / And sit with Tamburlaine in all his majesty” (I 1.2.165-209). Theridamas has not spoken anything of substance to Tamburlaine nor have they clashed in battle, but regardless Tamburlaine immediately extends faith and respect to his opponent—a stark contrast to his encounter with the Turkish Bajazeth.

Tamburlaine’s Persian forces and their probable difference of wardrobe in relation to their Turkish foes furthers a sense of distinction between Persians and other racial identities in the play—through performativity and the sheer length of their presence on stage.

Theridamas and his “thousand horse[s]” (I 1.2.168) then bravely follow Tamburlaine into battle as the Scythian rises to become the “proud usurping King of Persia” (II 3.1.16), and throughout both plays Tamburlaine’s forces remain largely Persian. His Persian forces not only engage in the spectacle of battle with the Turkish continuously, they are also ostensibly costumed in a manner that accentuates their difference to the potentially turban-wearing, scimitar-brandishing, mustached, brown-faced representations of Turkish people. Such visible differentiation and opposition to the villainous Turkish under the powerful, Scythian Tamburlaine, for the duration of two plays, would likely have enticed audiences to consider the Persians in a manner not unlike Tamburlaine. Indeed, audiences could easily come to respect the staged Persians for their bravery, strength, and repeated victories.

Through examination of Tamburlaine’s interactions with a variety of different Asian races, he not only differentiates and essentializes them, but stratifies them within a hegemony he dominates. The performative nature of the play then reinforces and to some extent imparts this act of differential racialization onto early modern audiences through visual representation of uncommon, racially-other figures. Essentialist readings of racial identity emerge as a result: Scythians are coded as inherently courageous, triumphant, and powerful; Egyptians

and Persians are respectable, brave, and reliable; and the Turkish are boastful, arrogant, and fearsome.

Undoubtedly, playgoers would view such representations with somewhat different preexisting conceptions of racial identity, but the fact remains that Tamburlaine is presented as a Scythian hero, wed to an Egyptian bride, leads Persian warriors, and combats Turkish foes. Marlowe does offer contrasting representations of these racial stereotypes within the text, but this differential racialization on the parts of both Tamburlaine and the audience remains intact through performance. Contrasting representatives of racial identity (such as the weak Persian, king Mycetes) do appear to complicate racial assumptions, but these characters do not remain on stage nearly as long as persistent characters such as Zenocrate or Theridamas. Ultimately, such persistent representations of race intermingle with geo-political and religious discourse regarding identity to both solidify racialized conceptions of various others and further influence subsequent racial discourse.

### **Consideration of Form**

To read race in both *Tamburlaine I* and *II* and the early modern period is to enter a critical conversation that must acknowledge the differences between our modern perception of race and its historical equivalent. My employment of performativity, evaluation of audience reception, and application of critical race theory has attempted to put these two moments in dialogue without erroneous conflation, but my perspective is incapable of entirely divorcing the context that informs it. Thus, I wish to invoke Caroline Levine's work in *Forms* as a potential vehicle for comparison that endeavors to subvert anachronistic concerns through consideration of race as a form and its potential to disrupt hierarchies of power in collision with other political and aesthetic forms across time.

Levine's work on forms presents an opportunity to challenge the dominance of race as an unwavering reaffirmation of power across time, and in doing so, she mediates historical difference. She theorizes "forms, defined as patternings, shapes, and arrangements" (Levine 13), and this capacious definition of forms bestows her work the potential to reassess how scholars and early modern audiences alike have interpreted race in *Tamburlaine*. Rather than imagining aesthetic forms (such as the plays and literature) as a means of universally reinforcing hegemonic discourse she claims, "aesthetic and political forms may be nested inside one another, and...each is capable of disrupting the other's organizing power" (Levine 16-17). For Levine, the collision of forms and subsequent interpretation of these collisions indicates their potential for disrupting power.

These collisions, the acknowledgment of differently-valued interpretive perspectives, and the potential for these interpretations to shift dramatically evinces tension in the establishment of complete power across forms. For example, *Tamburlaine* may provide a compelling figure through which early modern audiences mediated colonial anxieties, but his challenge to the efficacy of religion disrupts a totalizing understanding of him as figure upon which to project English identity. In the context of race, early modern audiences may have applauded *Tamburlaine*'s Scythian identity in tandem with his expansionist tendencies, but modern scholars may consider the collision of *Tamburlaine*'s race and imperialism as a subversive critique of the English. As Levine posits, "it is not so much divergent *interpretations* of the text as an array of competing hierarchies on the part of both the text and its readers" (Levine 110). The hierarchical valuation of forms themselves in interpretation is critical—which form is more important to the individual? Do they read or view the play more prominently considering geo-political discourse, religious tensions, or racial difference? What happens when race is made paramount and other forms secondary?

Race has historically been overshadowed in the *Tamburlaine* plays, but the shifting of

perspectives based in political forms (nation, colonialism, imperialism) over time allows for the comparison of collisions in both the early modern period and now. Race as a category of organization is interpreted differently through such comparison in much the same way that I argued its collision with aesthetic forms (reading the text vs. watching it in performance) reveals difference. I have established that the early modern public racialized figures of alterity in the Tamburlaine plays and extended these interpretations to their own self-construction, but critically the racial interpretations of the late 1500s were in dialogue with concerns regarding the Ottoman empire, establishment of what it meant to be English, and religion. But, race as a means of maintaining hegemonic power among other hierarchical forms, is not absolute, and interpretation of race in the plays has differed across time and in the context of shifting political forms. Notably, I return to Bartels' opinion that race in *Tamburlaine* is Marlowe's attempt to acknowledge and subvert racial assumptions. Further, I gesture to popular, modern consideration of Tamburlaine as tyrannical, grotesquely-brutal villain—an interpretation that draws heavily on post-colonial discourse and starkly contrasts early modern sentiments. Moreover, the very constituents of race as a form have shifted away from ideas such as humoralism due to a difference in the collision of race with medical knowledge, science, and philosophy.

Interpretation of both individual forms and their collective collisions are conditional and must change over time if hegemony is to maintain itself. Thus, acknowledgment of difference regarding the Tamburlaine plays' racially-based interpretation across distinct temporal moments challenges race's stability in the construction of identity as a means of oppression. As Levine claims, "the most consistent and painful affordance of hierarchical structures is inequality" (Levine 82), and racism "frequently functions as a spectrum, where graduations of skin color organize power and privilege within each category" (Levine 84). However, the malleability of racialization to serve a specific context inherently illustrates its

instability as a totalizing means of institutional domination. It is not inherently a binary, white-nonwhite distinction of privilege but a spectrum of that can ideally be redistributed in an egalitarian matter—accounting for the real violence of racism along the way.

Thus, difference across interpretation of race in Tamburlaine evinces the potential to disrupt racism and rethink its position in accordance with other forms. To read race in both *Tamburlaine I* and *II* is then an attempt to illuminate the text's purported racial hierarchy as removed from a religious or political context, and subsequently consider the ways such forms, both textually and externally, distort the initial interpretation. Ultimately, consideration of race in literature, as both an individual paradigm of organization and within a capacious formal dialogue, offers the potential to better ascertain the construction of power and ideological violence, recognize the potential for progress, and actively posit the need to revise racial hegemony. Influential literature, such as the Tamburlaine plays, does not exist in a vacuum and to deny the validity of racial interpretation or declare racial interpretation of the text to be 'solved' is to deny the capacity to affect meaningful change. Explication of race in *Tamburlaine I* and *II* is not only a worthwhile critical endeavor—it is a necessary one.



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